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**“THAT ALIEN. THAT UGLY. THAT POWERFUL.”:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE OANKALI AS THE MONSTROUS OTHER
IN OCTAVIA BUTLER’S *LILITH’S BROOD*.**

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Monsters come in all shapes and sizes. [...]

*Sometimes monsters are things people should
be scared of, but they aren't.*

Neil Gaiman, *The Ocean at the End of the
Lane.*

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I. Abstract

Octavia Butler's science fiction trilogy *Lilith's Brood*, also referred to as *Xenogenesis Series*, portrays a post-apocalyptic world in which the survivors of a devastating nuclear war in the 20th century are met with an alien species, the Oankali. In this instance of alien contact, Lilith Iyapo and the rest of humanity are faced with their monstrous-looking rescuers, who demand that, in exchange for salvation, humans reproduce with them. Yet, the Oankali's attempt to interbreed with humankind is confronted by most humans, who refuse to the union in spite of the promise of youth and better health that this entails. Focusing on the three *Xenogenesis* novels, this dissertation aims to examine the refusal of humankind to merge with the Oankali in relation to the aliens' monstrous features. I argue that, in spite of the innumerable immoral acts performed on humanity, humans' sole objection to the union is accounted for the Oankali's monstrous physical appearance, which will be present in their Oankali-Human hybrid children. As the analysis of the novels confirms, the more human the Oankali-Human hybrid children appear to be, the more desirable this union with the other becomes, as it is attested by the existence of Akin, Jodahs and Aaor.

Key words: Octavia Butler, *Lilith's Brood*, alien contact, monstrosity, agency

II. Introduction: Octavia Butler and the Xenogenesis Series

The *Xenogenesis Series*¹, written by Octavia Butler between 1987 and 1989, portrays a post-apocalyptic world in which survivors of a devastating nuclear war in the 20th century are met with an alien species, the Oankali. The Oankali, who are divided into males, females, and a third gender, the Ooloi, develop by means of “trade” - that is, genetic interbreeding with another species – a fact which inherently implies that humans must mate with the monstrous-looking aliens, and those who refuse will be sterilised.

In *Dawn* (1987), Lilith Iyapo, an African American woman, is Awakened² from an Oankali-induced coma two hundred and fifty years after the war. Lilith is told that she has been chosen, trained and genetically modified in order to Awaken other (English-speaking) humans so that they all can return to the Oankali-restored Earth. Yet, Lilith’s task is obstructed both by the Oankali, who infantilise humans, and by the majority of humans that she Awakens, who struggle to accept the alien’s physical features, which they deem to be monstrous. In *Adulthood Rites* (1988), we follow the story of one of Lilith’s children, the first male human-born construct. Akin, who looks mostly human, is let to live among human resisters so as to be able to understand them better than the Oankali do, and eventually advocates for a human-only colony in Mars. *Adulthood Rites* reveals how humans are gradually keener to accept the Oankali and their hybrid offspring, for Akin’s apparent humanity suggests that it is possible for future construct hybrid children to look more human than alien. Finally, in *Imago* (1989), Jodahs and Aaor, also Lilith’s children and the first construct Ooloi, leave their

¹ The three novels, *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988) and *Imago* (1989), have been published in an omnibus volume under the title *Lilith’s Brood* (2000), which is the edition that I am using.

² The term *Awake* is capitalized in concordance with the original text. It serves to distinguish between regular awakenings from those from the Oankali-induced coma.

trading village³ to find human partners. As they approach the time of metamorphosis, the equivalent of human puberty, Aor and Jodahs develop the ability to shape their physical appearance according to their mate's desires. With the capacity to eliminate all trace of monstrous features from their bodies, they will finally complete the union between humans and aliens, and will fulfil the transition into a new species.

Octavia Butler was an African American science fiction writer born in California in 1947. Butler's texts are often concerned with issues of genre, gender, and race, (Omry, 2007:65) matters of major significance which established her as a prominent figure. Often referred to as the "grand dame" of science fiction, Butler succeeded in this genre predominated by white male writers. (Omry, 2007: 64) With the publication of *Kindred* (1979) she established herself as a recognised author. The three *Xenogenesis* novels are contextualized by a period of convulsion in the United States, as the world saw the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall while Butler published her trilogy. The political situation of the 1980s and the long history of racism in the country shape Butler's narratives and are deeply connected to the trilogy. Sara Martín argues that "Los monstruos evolucionan y, aunque pueda parecer que son hijos ahistóricos del subconsciente colectivo, son de hecho síntomas muy claros de las preocupaciones de cada momento histórico". (Martín, 2002: 11) Omry claims that "the rigid political economy of reproduction during slavery and its implications on gendered roles, identities, and definitions become reconfigured in Butler's award-winning short story "Bloodchild" and in her *Xenogenesis* Series." (Omry, 2007:66) In fact, Butler being an African-American author "experienced the burden of racism through the experiences of her mother who worked as a housemaid." (Omry, 2007: 64) Certainly, Lilith's situation of constant tension with the "other", whether it refers to the monstrous Oankali or to

³ Trading villages are those where Oankali and Humans cohabit together with their construct children.

any other human person, is reminiscent of the political and social background of the time. Therefore, most research on the series usually approaches the text in terms of race, gender and sexuality. Researchers like Patricia Melzer discuss the text from a colonialist perspective, whereas Michael Levy approaches Octavia Butler's narratives from the framework of the slave narratives, and even argues that "the Oankali [...] control their human captives more efficiently than any slave owner." (Levy, 2009: 44) Goss and Riquelme also interpret the text from a post-colonial perspective. Yet, they go beyond and discuss the role of the human and the post-human in the trilogy. Indeed, the *Xenogenesis Series* is a prime example of how science fiction texts favour discussions of race and ethnicity. In contrast, researchers like Sherryl Vint (2007), a researcher with great experience in the field of science fiction, focus on the genetic discourse and look into its sociobiological aspects; thus, Vint considers the human rejection of the Oankali to be a consequence of fear of genetic manipulation.

Nevertheless, the aim of this dissertation is, rather, to analyse the condition of the Oankali as the "monstrous other" in relation to humans, as most human beings reject the idea of merging with the alien species, even though it entails direct neural pleasant stimulation, as well as better health and long-lasting youth. Focusing on the three *Xenogenesis* novels, I argue that, despite their innumerable immoral acts performed on humankind, human's sole objection to uniting with the Oankali is due to their monstrous physical traits. Therefore, I consider that rejecting the Oankali is unavoidable and accounted for by their prominent monstrous physical features. In fact, as it will be discussed, the vast majority of humans do not condemn the immoral acts perpetrated by the Oankali; their sole objection is against their physical appearance since this will be present in their mixed human-Oankali offspring until, after many generations, they show the ability of concealing their alien heritage. Therefore, I will focus here on the

monstrous aspects of the Oankali as the main reason for human rejection, and will explore it in the experience of the main characters. This dissertation is structured in three main parts: to begin with, I will analyse the Oankali's monstrous features and how the term *monster* applies to them and Lilith. The second section of this paper will deal with the Oankali's moral monstrosity, as exerted over Lilith and the rest of humanity, and the third and last section will focus on Lilith's children, whose existence unveils the true motives behind the resisters' fear of the Oankali, showing that a union with the Oankali is desirable when these are capable of retaining an almost human physical appearance.

III. The Ugly Monster- The Rejection of Non-Human Features.

In *Dawn*, twenty-eight-year-old Lilith Awakens in a light-coloured room with no apparent exit. With no family left, for her husband and only son had died before the nuclear war that destroyed Earth, Lilith finds no solace in her seclusion. However, after two long years of intermittent solitary confinement, she is confronted by one of her captors, Jdahya, a male Oankali. Jdahya tells Lilith that the Oankali, an alien species, saved the surviving humans from the war and kept them in an induced sleep on their living, organic ship during two hundred and fifty years. Consequently, the Oankali have had plenty of time to learn from humans, and to restore Earth to make it safe for human life again. Nevertheless, the Oankali, who evolve by means of trade, that is, by merging genetically with other species, demand that humans accept to reproduce with them, and those who object will be sterilised. Lilith is expected to accept the Oankali, to join Jdahya's family consisting of a female, a male, an Ooloi and their children, and learn from them so as to be able to Awaken other humans and train them to survive on the Oankali-restored Earth. Yet, in this instance of alien contact, what is most striking is not

the prospects of a union with the alien species, but the monstrous physical appearance of the other, as it is going to be explored now.

During Lilith's first encounter with Jdahya, what Lilith mistakes for "the figure of a man, thin and long-haired" (11) turns out to be a monstrous-looking alien:

What had seemed to be a tall, slender man was still humanoid, but it had no nose – no bulge, no nostrils – just flat, gray skin. [...] The hair grew down around its eyes and ears and at its throat. [...] She had not known what held her back before. Now she was certain it was his alienness, his difference, his literal unearthliness. (13)

Following Bakhtin, Lilith's reaction towards Jdahya is accounted for the fact that "of all the features of the human face, the nose and mouth play the most important part in the grotesque image of the body." (2007: 92) However, it is not only the different configuration of facial features what astounds Lilith, but also the fact that "the hair—the whatever-it-was—moved." (13) Aware of his physical oddities, Jdahya confesses that "what you probably see as hair isn't hair at all. I have no hair. The reality seems to bother humans." (13) Indeed, upon her discovery, Lilith can only describe it as "Medusa." (13) These apparent snakes are in fact tentacles, sensory organs with which the Oankali perceive the world, and which "individually, they did look more like big worms than small snakes. Long and slender or short and thick." (15)

Jdahya being acquainted with humans' fear, and perceiving Lilith's discomfort, encourages her to approach him and touch him. Yet, she is incapable of doing so: "The tentacles were elastic. At her shout, some of them lengthened, stretching toward her. She imagined big, slowly writhing, dying night crawlers stretched along the sidewalk after a rain. She imagined small, tentacled sea slugs—nudibranchs—grown impossibly to human size and shape." (14) "His tentacles writhed repulsively." (19) In general, Jdahya's "grotesque sea-slug appearance" (26) provokes her "panic and revulsion." (26) However, barring Jdahya's lack of facial features and his multiplicity of tentacles, the

rest of his anatomy is somewhat human-like: “Palm in the center, many fingers all the way around. The fingers had bones in them, at least; they weren’t tentacles. And there were only two hands, two feet. He could have been so much uglier than he was, so much less . . . human.”(23, original ellipsis) Lilith is aware of the irrationality of her panic towards his monstrous physicality, and admits that what she feels is “a true xenophobia.”(23) It is only when Jdahya’s tentacles flatten against his skin as an expression of amusement that she dares to approach him and touch him: “His tentacles seemed to solidify into a second skin. [...] He looked remarkably human now. Was it only the tentacles that gave him that sea-slug appearance? His coloring hadn’t changed. The fact that he had no eyes, nose, or ears still disturbed her, but not as much.” (24-25) Yet, “the grotesque sea-slug appearance resumed and she could not stop herself from stumbling away from him in panic and revulsion.” (28) This combination of animal and human also contribute to the Oankali *grotesquerie*, in the conventional sense of “repulsively ugly or distorted.” (Edwards and Graulund, 2013: position 186) Therefore, the Oankali’s absence of facial features and their abundance of tentacles are the main contributors to Oankali monstrosity. Furthermore, these “murkily translucent, pale gray worms,” (18) that is, the tentacles, result poisonous to humans when they sting, either deliberately or as a result of a defensive reflex act, fact which adds to their monstrosity.

Having seen the Oankali’s grotesque features, it results easy to understand why the vast majority of humans who first encounter an Oankali react with fear and rejection. The unfavourable impression produced by the Oankali’s grotesqueness is such that, when Lilith finally assumes the task of Awakening humans, instead of warning them of the degrading situation in which the humans find themselves, she prepares them for the shock that the Oankali’s monstrous features might cause them, warning them that “the

Oankali are ugly. Grotesque.” (131) In spite of having been warned by Lilith that the Oankali are “That alien. That ugly. That powerful,”(149) most humans react with fear when they first encounter one. Not even Joseph, a Chinese man Awakened by Lilith, who becomes her lover, and who has been repeatedly warned about their monstrous physical appearance, can conceal his dread of such a creature: “Joseph [...] froze when he saw Nikanj. After a moment of what Lilith suspected was absolute terror, he jerked himself to his feet and stumbled back against the wall.” (151) Joseph tries to rationalise his fear, and admits that “You [the Oankali] don’t look that threatening. Just... very different.” (186, original ellipsis) MacCormack supports this idea of dreading difference, and argues that “certain traits, forms and ways of negotiating the world are considered the only ways. [...] Monsters are scary because they do not fit into the classifications we create in order for something to exist at all.” (2012: 296) Indeed, had the Oankali not foreseen the humans’ response and drugged them when first approaching them in groups, once Lilith has Awakened her chosen individuals, the aftermath could have been tragic, for, as I have mentioned, the Oankali might accidentally sting and consequently kill a human as a reflex act against a human attack. This confirms, then, the Oankali awareness of the effect of their monstrous presence.

Nonetheless, there is another element that adds to the Oankali’s monstrous physical appearance. Lilith soon learns that the Oankali are a three-gendered alien species, with males, females and Ooloi. As Lilith’s first encounter with an Ooloi suggests, the Ooloi have an added element of monstrosity:

It was almost exactly Lilith’s size—slightly larger than Jdahya and considerably smaller than the female Tediin. And it had four arms. Or two arms and two arm-sized tentacles. The big tentacles, gray and rough, reminded her of elephants’ trunks—except that she could not recall ever being disgusted by the trunk of an elephant (48)

The Ooloi have two additional extremities, with which they are able to genetically manipulate organisms and mix genetic material from males and females, being, thus, responsible for reproduction. Certainly, the Ooloi's main role as reproductive agents contributes to their being generally disliked by all humans, since they are bound to manufacture the future Human-Oankali hybrid children, "Medusa children. Snakes for hair. Nests of night crawlers for eyes and ears." (43) As it is expected, the majority of human men have difficulties adjusting to Oankali-human relationships, for they perceive these as non-heterosexual unions. Even Joseph mistakes Nikanj, Jdahya's Ooloi child and Lilith's mate, for a male, and refuses to unite with Lilith through him:

"I don't want him here again."

"Nikanj isn't male [...]."

"Don't let him touch you! If you have a choice, keep away from him!"

[...]

"It isn't male, Joseph." (170)

In other words, the Ooloi function as intermediaries during the sexual intercourse between a male and a female partner, stimulating them neurally and enhancing their experience. The fact that it is the Ooloi's extra extremities which are in charge of pleasing the Ooloi's mates and mixing their genetic material, and that they correspond to their sexual organs, accentuates the idea of penetration. Thus, this experience of "threesome" is rejected by most human men, because it challenges not only traditional monogamous relationships, but also hetero-patriarchal structures.

These two odd-looking members in addition to their already physical characteristics make the Ooloi even more different and grotesque. According to Bakhtin, "special attention is given to the shoots and branches, to all that prolongs the body and links it to other bodies or to the world outside." (2007: 92) The Oankali clearly stand out in this

sense, for their whole body is covered in branches and prolongations of the body⁴. In other words, their sensory spots and tentacles are what make the Oankali, and more prominently the Ooloi, especially grotesque, which is such that even Lilith, in spite of having been constantly manipulated and even impregnated against her will (39), rejects the Oankali because of their physical appearance: “For a moment, she saw Nikanj as she had once seen Jdahya—as a totally alien being, grotesque, repellant beyond mere ugliness with its night crawler body tentacles, its snake head tentacles, and its tendency to keep both moving.”(191)

In contrast, human features are highly praised and are attempted to be preserved. Even constructs, the Human-Oankali hybrid children, are afraid of losing their human physical traits, whether it is because they fear rejection from humans, or because they aesthetically prefer human features. This is the case of two of Lilith’s pre-pubescent – that is, pre-metamorphosis - children, “who had been afraid of metamorphosis—afraid they would change too much, lose all signs of their Humanity.” (524) In fact, there is only one occasion in which the rejection of alien contact is not soundly based on the monstrous looks of the alien. The only community who do not fear the Oankali as they are is the one that Jodahs and Aaor, Lilith’s children and the first Ooloi constructs, find in *Imago*. A reduced number of humans have mysteriously avoided being sterilised by the Oankali and have managed to reproduce among themselves, which results in terrible bodily alterations and malformations, presumably the aftermath of the distant nuclear war. They are aware of their own physical monstrosity, and when encountering the Oankali for the first time “they were fascinated, but they were not afraid.” (738) The

⁴ Despite the popularity of the series, there are no good representations of the Oankali looks on the Internet

human fear of the Oankali is, then, clearly based on their prominent monstrous appearance, which is undesired by their own hybrid offspring.

This fear of the other is introduced and prophesized by the title of this science fiction series, *Xenogenesis*, which suggests the birth of the “stranger, foreigner”, and thereby implies the loss of human purity and absolute human features. The use of words is relevant, for it anticipates key information about the text. In fact, Jacobs points out that “the name of the Oankali recalls the Hindu goddess Kali, [who] kills in order to bring about renewal and rebirth.” (2003: 96) Hence, humans are in Butler’s novels facing the ending of the human species as they know it, for humans will be reborn through their construct children, who will in turn carry the Oankali’s physical monstrosity with them. Lilith’s name also resonates with the mythological figure, known as the mother of devils, due to her becoming the first human woman impregnated with a hybrid child. Lilith’s becoming the mother of monsters is one of the factors that accounts for her being categorised as a monster herself, albeit, as I will now discuss, there are other factors that motivate her being labelled as such. In order to guarantee Lilith’s wellbeing when Awakening humans, whose reaction might be unpredictable, the Oankali alter Lilith’s genes and strengthen her. Not only that, but Lilith’s new abilities enable her to manipulate the organic, living ship and the room where she is to Awaken humans, so she can provide them with food and shelter. Upon realising Lilith’s superiority, “some of the humans she awakens characterize her as nonhuman and as a traitor to her species.” (Goss and Riquelme, 2007: 445) In fact, even Lilith “recognizes herself [...] to be “the alien, the uncomprehending outsider,” (Goss and Riquelme, 2007: 447) as she is rejected by humans and regarded as a monster.

Certainly, the aforementioned detailed descriptions enhance the sense of the Oankali grotesque features, and are a clear indication of the human’s dread. Having analysed the

grotesque and monstrous elements of the Oankali physicality, and how the majority of humans react negatively to the sight of them, it is conceivable to argue that this is the prime motive behind the human's objection to unite with the aliens. The following section will deal with the Oankali's moral monstrosity, so as to reveal how despite their numerous immoral acts, humans purely fear their physical monstrosity.

IV. Moral Monstrosity: Loss of Agency and Infantilisation

The Oankali fit perfectly into the category of the monster, considering that “monstrosity has been demonstrated as either performative [...] or physical.” (Ng, 2004: 144) Their un-earthliness is prominently expressed in their physical appearance. Consequently, the repulsion that most humans feel at their sight is not unjustified. Yet, there is much more to Oankali monstrosity than only their physicality. Albeit claiming to act in benefit of humankind – they rescue the few survivors of a nuclear war and keep them dormant in their orbiting ship while Earth is being restored – the Oankali mistreat and manipulate all those humans whom they choose to Awaken from their coma. Following Martín's alternate typology of the monster, which considers both the physicality and the behaviour of the monster, the Oankali might fit perfectly in the two first categories of monsters: “cuerpo extraordinario (monstruo físico) + conducta hostil (monstruo moral)” and “cuerpo extraordinario (monstruo físico) + conducta positiva.” (Martín, 2002: 36). This is due to the fact that the Oankali are the irrefutable saviours of humankind, and despite the moral acts that they perform on humans, they conceive their actions to be for the human's greater good. In other words, the Oankali never aim to cause pain to humans. Thereby, the Oankali's immoral monstrosity seems arguable, whereas their physical monstrosity is unquestionable. Nonetheless, even the salvation of humankind seems to have a hidden motive behind it for, as we learn, the Oankali are a

species that constantly need to mix with other species in order to survive and, coincidentally, humans are a perfect genetic match.

The Oankali repertory of techniques to manipulate humans ranges from keeping them in isolation and denying them any human contact, to making them dependent on their own contact and taking their DNA without their consent to generate other humans with their genetic material. However, as Lilith experiences, one of the greatest instances of Oankali moral monstrosity is their denial of human agency. Certainly, Lilith never has a choice. After having met Jdahya and having been informed of her situation, she is faced with only two possibilities: she must either accept the role that she is being offered, training other humans to survive on Earth and bearing hybrid children, or death. Having refused the latter, Lilith must comply and adapt in order to fulfil the role that she is given, in order to survive. After having first met an adult human male on the Oankali ship, Paul Titus, and having escaped from an attempt of rape, Lilith is completely aware of the dangers that may arise from the task of “parenting” a group humans. She was given “the work she did not want and could not do—the work that would probably get her killed. How many more Paul Tituses could she survive, after all?”(103)

As a result, Lilith repeatedly endures the consequences of this decision, developing her motto “Learn and Run!”(118) and losing all her agency. She soon realises that after two years of solitary confinement, and exhaustive interrogation, “they knew how to manipulate her, maneuver her into doing whatever they wanted.” (92) Patricia Melzer analyses Lilith’s situation and argues that “her resistance lies in negotiating the limits of her colonization in order to retain a sense of self. For example, she must accept body modifications that heighten her senses and strength, but she sets the terms under which they take place.” (2006: 57) Indeed, when, still in Jdahya’s household, Lilith is required

to learn the Oankali language, she demands to use human tools, such as pen and paper, to help her learn faster. However, the Oankali will not permit it, and she is forced to undergo genetic manipulation in order to enhance her linguistic and memoristic abilities. Nikanj, Jdahya's Ooloi child and Lilith's future mate, who is in charge of teaching her, tells her that one of its⁵ parents will modify her without her being aware. She realises that she will be genetically modified against her will, and decides to accept it only when she is ready but still in anger: "Wake up and do whatever it is you claim you have to do. Get it over with." (79) Thereby, Lilith regains her agency by constant negotiation with the other, and her attempts to regain her agency are clearly different from the resisters' endeavours. Jacobs argues that "most [resisters] exercise agency in only the most brutal forms," (2003: 101) for most resisters attempt to attack the Oankali and those who align with them in order to recuperate their agency.

In addition to this, Lilith is a captive in the Oankali household, as she is not genetically enhanced to be able to open the ship's walls, which react to chemical stimuli. Her situation is only an echo of the circumstances in which humankind is mistreated and patronised, withal. By being denied their agency, humans do not hold the same status as the Oankali do, even though they are expected to engage in a relationship with three Oankali⁶. In fact, Lilith often questions her role in the Oankali family structure, of which she is forced to become a part: "'You must stay with me,' [Nikanj] said in a tone that reminded her of a human mother speaking to her five-year-old. That, she thought, was about right for her rank in its family." (63) Indeed, Lilith's rank in the family is that of a sexless child, as her Oankali name indicates. Jacobs rightly claims that Lilith and the rest of humanity are infantilized (2003: 98), which is taken to the

⁵ The Ooloi being the third gender, they are referred to as "it".

⁶ Humans are expected to join the Oankali in heterosexual pairs and form five-parent families.

extreme when humans are denied reproduction among themselves. Akin, Lilith's construct - that is, hybrid - male child, is the one who speaks in behalf of resister humans in front of the Oankali to grant them a human-only colony in Mars in *Adulthood Rites*. In fact, the Oankali do not even allow humans to participate in the debate, and Jodahs, also Lilith's child, admits in *Imago* that the Oankali "help [with the Mars colony] because of what we constructs tell them." (532) In general, the attitude of the Oankali towards humans is, as an unnamed resister visitor to Lo complains, "goddamn patronizing." (532) Even the foundations of Oankali-Human relationships are questionable, for the Ooloi have altered the human's neurological system, making humans dependent on them, to the point that any temporal separation proves to be unbearable. This control over human's bodies and actions goes even beyond. In *Imago*, the reader realises that the Oankali release a scent charged with pheromones, which not only attracts humans, but also modifies their behaviour, soothing them and manipulating their emotional responses.

Following Martín, who argues that "Mientras el individuo teme ser rechazado por sus congéneres y quedar al margen de la normalidad, los grupos temen perder sus privilegios," (Martín, 2002:17) and having seen how humans do indeed lose their privileges, including their agency, one could argue that this is the prime motive impelling humans to reject the Oankali and their promise of hybrid children. Nonetheless, as I have argued in section 1, and as I will further discuss in the following section, what humans fear most is the Oankali monstrous features, which will be transmitted into their hybrid children. Such a fear is accounted for the fact that "behaviour holds the possibility for reform, whereas a monstrous body allows less possibility for modification." (Edwards and Graulund, 2013: position 978)

V. Resolution: Accepting the Other

As it has been established in the previous sections, humans' rejection of the Oankali is soundly based on the alien's physical monstrous appearance. In order to provide further evidence for this, in this section I will examine the final reconciliation between the Oankali and humanity, which, I argue, is borne out by the humans' fascination of the human-looking constructs.

At the end of *Dawn*, Lilith cannot leave the Oankali ship for Earth, for they have already made her pregnant without her consent, and she must face the horror of bearing the first construct:

"It will be a thing – not human." She stared down at her own body in horror. "It's inside me, and it isn't human!"

[...]

"It will be a thing. A monster." (247)

Vint (2007: 65) suggests that Lilith's reaction towards her unborn child is due to how it threatens her human identity. Yet, as we see in *Adulthood Rites*, she is mostly afraid of the hybrid's possible physical features. When Akin is born and becomes the first human-born male construct, she considers thanking Nikanj "for making him look this way – for making him seem Human so I can love him... for a while." (254, original ellipsis) Lilith is aware that all constructs change after they undergo metamorphosis, the equivalent of adolescence, and her words are a clear statement of how, despite loving her children, she struggles to accept their non-human features.

Unlike Lilith, when facing this dead end in which resisters' only option to have children is by uniting with the Oankali, some of them commit suicide. Others seem to face this issue from another perspective, taking what they cannot have and kidnapping

the most human-looking constructs. This is the case of Akin and two other construct children, who are kidnapped because of their uncommon human looks. However, contrary to Akin, these two little construct girls are threatened by some humans, who plan to cut some of their few sensory tentacles, so “they’ll learn to use their Human senses [...] and be more like us.”(375) Following Bakhtin (2007), I argue that the sensory organs make the Oankali remarkably monstrous, contributing to the human’s dread of the little hybrid children. Akin, on the other hand, happens to look absolutely human, but for little sensory spots that are hidden at first sight:

“ ‘No tentacles,’ one of them said, stroking his face. ‘So Human. So beautiful...’

[...] These people liked him simply because he looked like them.”(385 original ellipsis)

Akin’s looks are so human-like that Lilith fears that “adapted” humans will “resent him for not being completely Human and for looking more Human than their kids.” (258)

However, “Akin’s name [...] suggests kinship, [...], he is a kin, one of us, akin, not an alien, not a stranger.” (Goss and Riquelme, 2007: 451) Akin is, thus, a kin until he

metamorphoses, when he turns absolutely Oankali-looking, and wonders “how many resisters will trust me now?” (500) Therefore, Akin is aware of how his acceptance in

resister’s villages is determined by his human looks. Indeed, the Oankali recognise how

their appearance conditions the humans’ response, and, from the beginning, they intend

to improve their abilities with genetic engineering, since “Future Oankali may be much

less frightening to potential trade partners if they’re able to reshape themselves and look

more like the partners before the trade.”(41) Thereby, the Oankali consider their

physical appearance to be a key factor in being accepted by humankind. As we see in

Adulthood Rites and *Imago*, the resisters’ attitude towards constructs is that of fear of

difference, but also of yearning for something of which they have been deprived.

Constructs like pre-metamorphosis Akin and his Ooloi siblings Aaor and Jodahs, who

can unconsciously acquire an almost-human resemblance, can survive and adapt into the resisters society: “with constructs, acceptance of the other is complete.” (Melzer, 2006: 79)

Aaor and Jodahs are exceptional individuals, for they are capable of altering their physical image according to the desires of their potential mates. As Jodahs, who is more precocious than its sibling Aaor, experiences, its “body has been striving to please her [a resister woman]. You’re more brown now—less gray. Your face is changed subtly.” (588) This accomplishment is exceptional among constructs, and resisters, who are by now used to the Oankali and diverse monstrous-looking constructs, marvel at the possibility. This is the case of Marina, a human resister whom Jodahs and his family encounter in the forest: “You’re beautiful, you know? You shouldn’t be, but you are.” (586) The human idea of the Oankali is that of a monstrous creature, and Jodahs and Aaor challenge their expectations. Jodahs is able to seduce resisters with its image and scent, and unconsciously adapts to them physically, even to the point of acquiring complete womanly features while in company with one male resister: “I had grown breasts myself, and developed an even more distinctly Human female appearance. I neither directed my body nor attempted to control it. [...] It seemed totally focused on João.” (601) Their abilities to adapt are so strong that previous resisters, who are heading to Lo⁷ in order to embark on a ship to the Mars colony, are even considering staying with the Oankali: “She stared at us both and shook her head. ‘I could almost stay,’ she said. ‘It doesn’t seem as bad as it once did—the Oankali, the idea of ... different children. ...’” (581, original ellipsis) However, such abilities have unfavourable implications, for Jodahs and Aaor cannot retain their form without human mates: “Jodahs and Aaor literally have no sense of self- no bodily integrity- unless they

⁷ Lo is the name of the trading village where Lilith and her family decide to settle.

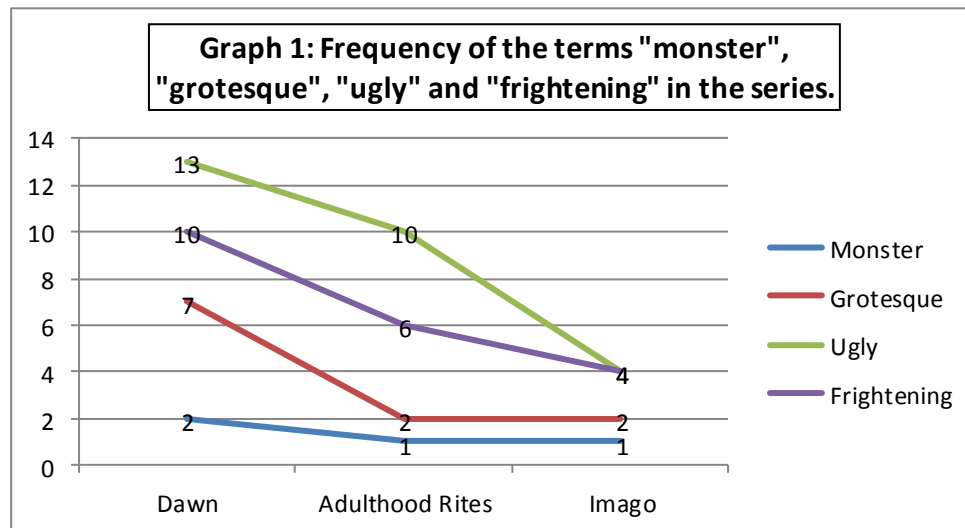
can construct themselves in response to the desire of another,” (Vint, 2007: 76); as Jacobs adds, “the price of [their] powers, then, is interdependence.” (Jacobs, 2003: 107) In fact, Aaor almost loses its identity completely, becoming a mollusk-like form when it loses contact with other Oankali while looking for human mates.

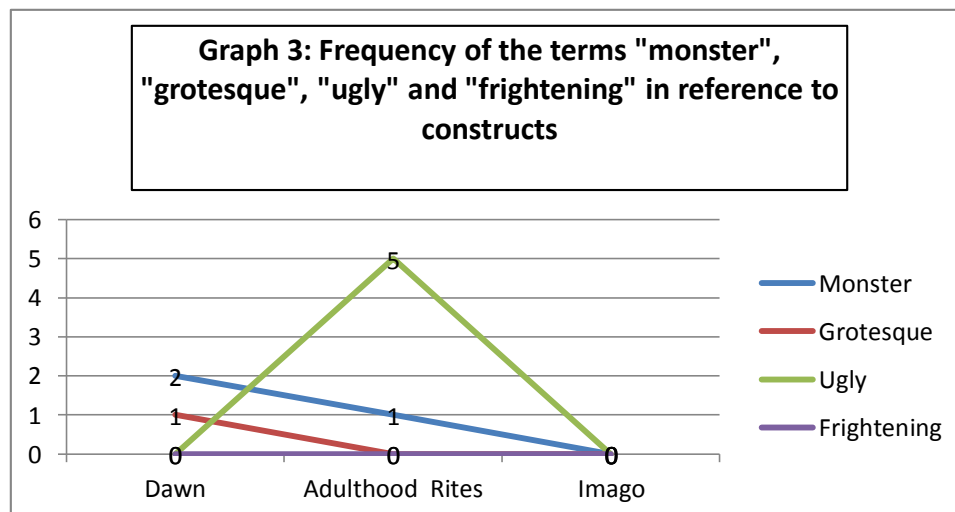
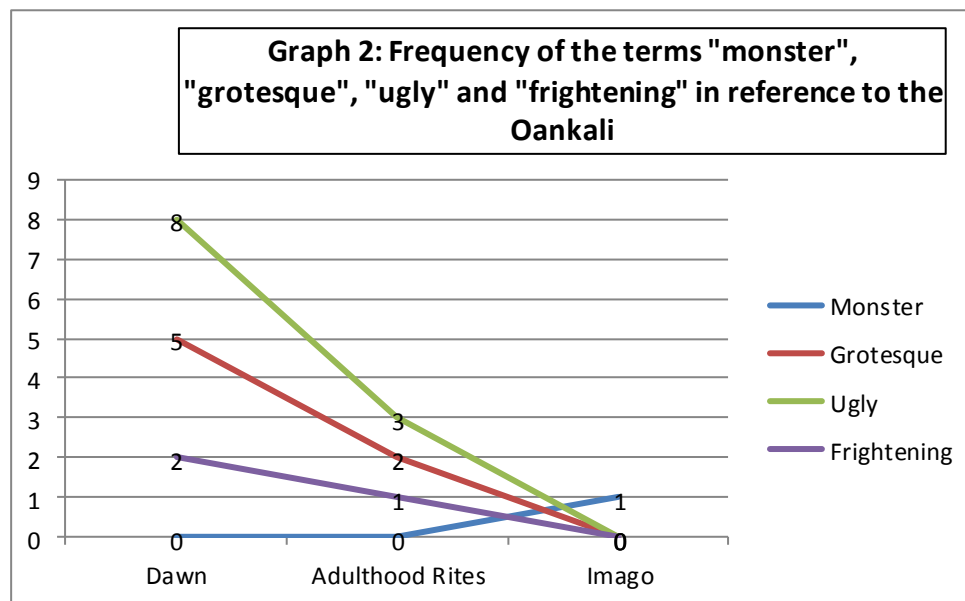
Jodahs and Aaor’s existence proves to be a deciding factor for most humans that they encounter, for their shape-shifting abilities make humans start questioning the rationale behind their rejecting the Oankali, and all the benefits that they know such a union entails. Hence, Jodahs and Aaor become the object of desire for even the most reluctant of human resisters, as is the case of Francisco, who openly asks Jodahs to become his partner (723). In view of Jodahs’ negative, this human resister decides to leave to Mars, and argues that “if there had been people like [Jodahs and Aaor] around a hundred years ago, I couldn’t have become a resister. I think there would be no resisters,” (740) thus affirming that the Oankali’s physical appearance was the main obstacle in their relationship.

Yet, as the third volume, *Imago*, suggests, Jodahs and Aaor represent, not only a desirable union with the Oankali, but also the completion of the new construct species. *Imago* is “an insect in its final, adult, sexually mature, and typically winged state or an idealized” or a “mental image of another person or the self”⁸. Thereby, the title of the novel retains the idea that the Oankali are grotesque, insect-like creatures, but at the same time introduces the idea of Aaor and Jodahs’ ability to replicate someone else’s image. At the very end of the series we learn that more young constructs are becoming Ooloi after metamorphosis, that is, more constructs will have this shape-shifting ability. As a result, merging with the Oankali is now desired, and the completion of the new construct species can be achieved.

⁸ Both definitions are from the dictionary Merriam-webster.com

Finally, in order to confirm the humans' lack of sympathy towards the Oankali and their hybrid children, I have analysed the whole trilogy in order to confirm the frequency of the terms "monster", "grotesque", "ugly", and "frightening". I have calculated the frequency of these in order to assess whether the attitude towards the Oankali and their construct hybrid children is altered as new generations assimilate more easily human features. As the graphics and the data below show, these words tend to disappear from the novels, as the appearance of constructs facilitates the acceptance of the other.





As the third graph shows, the only instance in which the frequency of the term “ugly” increases in relation of the construct children is in *Adulthood Rites*. This is accounted for by the fact that the second novel in the series basically deals with the resisters’ acceptance of the hybrid children, as they increasingly become more human. Certainly, this section has shed light on the rejection of monstrous features, as the human appearance of Akin, Jodahs and Aaor are deemed desirable by human resisters, who do not consider their moral monstrosity.

VI. Conclusions

This dissertation has analysed both aspects of monstrosity, moral and physical, and has seen them applied to the alien species of the Oankali. As it has been argued, the aliens in this science fiction trilogy patronise and infantilise humans to the point of denying them their agency, which might account for the fact that humans strongly object to the proposed hybrid union. I have, thus, established that the Oankali fit perfectly into the category of the monster, not only because of the monstrous acts that they perform on humans, but also because of their prominent monstrous and grotesque features. Despite their innumerable immoral acts, human's sole objection to uniting with the Oankali is due to their monstrous physical traits.

As the analysis of the series has attested, humans are especially afraid of all those physical characteristics that show a deviation from the human form. The first encounter with an Oankali is primarily appalling, and even construct Oankali-human hybrid children dread to lose their human traits after metamorphosis. The Oankali are well aware of the fact that they are perceived as "alien[,] ugly [and] powerful" (149), and intend to improve their genetic manipulation of their construct children so as they result more attractive to humans. This begins to be achieved with Akin, whose apparent human image as a baby facilitates his being kidnaped by sterile human resisters. However, it is with Jodahs and Aaor that the boundaries of physical monstrosity are broken, for they unconsciously shape themselves in concordance with their mates' desires. With the existence of these two construct Ooloi whose looks are no longer monstrous, and more like them to come, the acceptance of the Oankali is now granted, and it is safe to assume that, with the exception of those humans that have fled to Mars, humanity will merge with the Oankali in a new species.

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